

SAN DIEGO READER

STORIES LETTERS

Letters

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The People's Park?

Re “What’s wrong with Balboa Park?” (Cover Story, July 31). Your author attended the introductory lecture that addressed this subject, read the accompanying report, interviewed a few officials, and prepared a report that was a précis of all that had gone before. For those who hadn’t attended the discussions, he performed a service. He was objective and allowed his speakers to outline the ostensible successes of Balboa Park. As I attended this lecture and read the reports, I don’t recall that so much emphasis was placed on the institutional needs that the author discovered.

First, I disagree that Balboa Park is all right the way it is. The people who made this statement were purposely blind on speaking on behalf of a Chamber of Commerce that wants San Diegans to believe they are living in the best of all possible worlds. Can’t these people see? Or is it possible that visual blight has become so common everywhere in America that people cannot conceive alternatives?

Second, as with so many studies of Balboa Park, the emphasis is on the Central Mesa, where the Zoo and buildings are located. The cliché that Balboa Park is the Smithsonian of the West is again intoned. How many people have been to the mall in Washington, D.C., and studied the mistakes that have been made there? How many are aware that the Smithsonian museums are not all on the mall? How many know that the majority of them are free?

Washington, D.C., Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and San Francisco have greater museums than those in Balboa Park. Their collections cover all facets

of art and science, ancient and modern. The architecture of buildings is compatible with their surroundings and of a high architectural order. Buildings are pleasing to look at and to move into. They are so widely spaced they do not exist cheek-by-jowl. Views from the tops are the talk of the towns. So much for the uneven collection of crowded, cramped, and unsightly museums in Balboa Park that outdo each other with banners, flags, and lights that destroy whatever architectural and aesthetic merit some of the original Spanish-Colonial buildings may have had. The 1935 additions are awkward boxes on the outside and clumsy aisles on the inside. Yet 1935 is the year historical preservationists want to re-create in Balboa Park — re-create that is with incongruous sculptures by Niki de Saint Phalle making a mockery of the architecture and history of buildings that pay tribute to the breathtaking examples of Spanish-Colonial buildings in Mexico, Central, and South America.

The focus on the Central Mesa as a tourist and money-making attraction has been the ruin of Balboa Park. Its constricted and obsolete layout is the cause of Balboa Park's insoluble circulation problems, and it is the maw that devours whatever private or public money can be extracted to the detriment of the natural green outdoor portions of the park that line the east and west sides.

The speakers made a big fuss about obtaining public approval for whatever may happen to the park. This is not going to happen. San Diego voters have historically turned down park bonds because they saw their money going to mushrooming cultural institutions and not to picnic and festival areas, dog parks, playfields, and the many imaginative recreational projects that could be put into the park for the benefit of residents if the money were not always diverted away. What the City will do, as it did with the Naval Hospital, Veterans' Center, and other establishments that belong anywhere in the city but in a public park, is to find a way to circumvent public approval. Leasing buildings is the easiest way to do this, and each lease means a dilution of public control. Tourists and Chamber of Commerce officials will be delighted. Park-going citizens will have to seek other outlets for the improvement of their physical and mental health and for the fostering of democratic values that parks like Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City and the Commons and the Emerald Necklace in Boston have made their chief aims.

There is an irony that the chief complaint of a visitor to the park was the presence of the homeless. As leases grow, as the park becomes more and more a private domain, the homeless will go elsewhere or put up a fight. Try as the Chamber of Commerce and City Officials may, they will not disappear.

How to make the park pay for itself? Cut off subsidies to the museums and zoo. Charge for parking everywhere in the park, with special low fees for residents, build as many underground parking garages as are necessary, and stop the building of vanity fountains, so constructed that people cannot dangle their feet in the water. If the voters do not approve park improvement projects, then the park must go where it is heading. If a true benefactor occurs, his concern will be for the welfare of the people as a whole and not with the promotion of his set or his personal hobbies. Somewhere in Balboa Park there will always be grass, trees, and the earth itself to offer its warm touch and embrace to those who crave the solace it alone can give.

Richard W. Amero

San Diego